Research Articles

The "Favorite Person" in Borderline Personality Disorder: A Content Analysis of Social Media Posts

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Supplementary Materials: Code, Data, Materials [see Index of Supplementary Materials]

Abstract

In the borderline personality disorder (BPD) online community, shared experience has led to the emergence of the term "favorite person" (FP) to describe a unique interpersonal relationship. Despite its widespread use, this term has not been defined in the scholarly literature. The purpose of this exploratory study was to develop a working definition of FP through quantitative content analysis of relevant Instagram posts. Results suggest that FP may be defined as an insecure attachment figure who consumes the thoughts and evokes the abandonment fears of individuals with BPD. The FP is viewed as a rescuer and depended on for a sense of identity and emotional validation. Reactivity of mood and a tendency to hypermentalize around the FP may contribute to the instability evident in these relationships. These findings offer a novel understanding of the lived experience of BPD relationships, having important implications for treatment and stigma reduction.

Keywords

With the rise of the internet and social media, online mental health communities have become a platform where individuals provide and receive support or advice, engage in self-disclosure, and exchange information (Berger et al., 2005; De Choudhury & De, 2014; Gowen et al., 2012; Naslund et al., 2016). Within the community of individuals with borderline personality disorder (BPD), a severe mental illness defined by a pervasive pattern of instability in affect, interpersonal relationships, and sense of self (American

Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022), shared experience has led to the emergence of the term "favorite person" (FP) to describe someone whom an individual with BPD "fear[s] abandonment and rejection from the most" (Anonymous, 2017), bases their "sense of identity" on (Jonas, 2022), "idolize[s]" (Phillips, 2020), is "obsessed with" (Hawley, 2019) and "emotionally dependent on" (Graud, 2018), seeks "constant validation from" (Virzi, 2017), "cannot function without" (James, 2020), and who "stimulates [their BPD] symptoms" (Newman, 2021). A word frequency analysis of online discussions about the FP suggested that the FP is someone with whom individuals with BPD form an intense, insecure attachment, in an often dysfunctional and destructive relationship (Jeong et al., 2022). Demonstrating its pertinence to the BPD community, a study using natural language processing found that the term "FP" was the second most important feature (after "BPD") in predicting whether a Reddit post appeared in the r/BPD versus other mental health condition subreddits (i.e., community forums; Low et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the term FP has not been systematically delineated in the scholarly literature.

Interpersonal dysfunction, characterized by an intense, volatile, and unstable relational style (APA, 2022), is a core feature of BPD. Theorists have suggested that BPD arises from the transaction between constitutional vulnerabilities and problematic relationships early in life which lead to distorted internal representations, or working models, of the self and others (e.g., Clarkin et al., 2007; Fonagy et al., 2011; Kernberg, 2004). Consequently, individuals with BPD develop insecure attachment styles characterized by an expectation of abandonment or threat, clinging behavior and a need for closeness, attention and support (Gunderson, 1996; Levy et al., 2015), an impaired capacity to understand their own and others' mental states (i.e., mentalize; Fonagy et al. 2011), and a tendency to oscillate between idealization and devaluation of others (APA, 2022; Kernberg, 2004). Generally, they report more frequent conflict, criticism, and ruptures within relationships, as well as lower relationship satisfaction, and poorer social support (Beeney et al., 2018; Clifton et al., 2007; Lazarus et al., 2016).

While much of the research on interpersonal dysfunction in BPD has focused on global social impairment, developmental theories describe BPD as developing and being maintained in close relationships (Fonagy & Bateman, 2008; Fruzzetti & Fantozzi, 2008; Linehan, 1993). Evidence suggests that acute symptoms of BPD and interpersonal instability are more likely and more pronounced in close relationships (Hepp et al., 2016). Individuals with BPD report greater polarization (i.e., idealization, devaluation) than healthy controls in their feelings toward important individuals in their lives (Coifman et al., 2012) and heightened hostility in response to perceived rejection by romantic, but not non-romantic, partners (Lazarus et al., 2018). Consistent with literature suggesting intra-individual variability in internal working models and attachment across relationships (Baldwin et al., 1996; Cozzarelli et al., 2000; Fraley, 2007; Fraley et al., 2011), attachment styles of individuals with BPD are noted to vary depending on the type of relationship, with a hypersensitivity towards close individuals (Fonagy et al., 2003). Their mentalizing

ability also appears to deteriorate in close attachment relationships, especially during situations of attachment hyperactivation or anxiety, leading them to misread others' minds. Parallels have been drawn between close attachments and addiction (Burkett & Young, 2012), suggesting that these relationships can become a preoccupation involving persistent and obsessive thoughts about significant others. Collectively, these findings suggest that the severity and forms of maladaptive interpersonal patterns in BPD are not uniform across relationships and instead intensify as closeness increases. The FP, then, may represent a relational context in which these patterns are particularly pronounced.

Interpersonal difficulties in BPD impact and are influenced by, including emotion dysregulation (Crowell et al., 2014; Linehan, 1993) and issues of identity (Clarkin et al., 2007). Given the absence of an existing theoretical framework of the FP, interpersonal patterns reflecting these difficulties may also serve as a basis for understanding the FP relationship in BPD. Emotional reactivity in individuals with BPD appears to be heightened in relational contexts, especially in response to interpersonal threats (e.g., social rejection, negative evaluation; see Fitzpatrick et al., 2021). For example, higher levels of jealousy, which is predicted by attachment anxiety (Chursina, 2023), has been associated with BPD and likely results from preoccupation with abandonment. Studies suggest that the emotional states or moods of individuals with BPD are dependent on the perceived or actual quality of their attachment relationships and others' feelings toward them (see Gunderson & Lyons-Ruth, 2008). BPD is also associated with heightened emotional contagion, or proneness to "catching" (i.e., taking on) the emotions of others (Blunden et al., 2024). Lacking the skills to regulate their own emotions (Gunderson, 1996; Linehan, 1993), individuals with BPD may heavily rely on interpersonal emotion regulation strategies (Gratz et al., 2016), seeking the help of others to alleviate distress. Further, due to early invalidating environments, those with BPD may not learn to trust their thoughts and feelings as accurate responses to events (Linehan, 1993), and thus may look to others for acknowledgement that their internal experiences are valid.

Individuals with BPD tend to have difficulties with self-other differentiation (Beeney et al., 2015; de Bonis et al., 1995) and adopt the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of significant others (Kernberg, 2006). They describe experiencing a strong, persistent need for affirmation and attention from others to maintain a sense of self or meaning (Jørgensen & Bøye, 2022), such that their identities may depend on their relationships. Relatedly, their feelings of self-worth appear to be easily influenced by interpersonal experiences (Zeigler–Hill & Abraham, 2006), fluctuating based on the valence of an interaction.

An understanding of the FP relationship in BPD may add valuable nuance to our knowledge of interpersonal dysfunction in BPD, particularly by highlighting the existence of a relationship context in which it is especially prominent. The purpose of the present exploratory study is to introduce a working definition of the FP through a quantitative content analysis of the basic characteristics, interpersonal constructs, and BPD symptoms evident in FP-relevant content on Instagram. We also aimed to explore

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the underlying dimensions of the FP relationship through an exploration of the factor structure of the observable characteristics of Instagram posts.

Method

Data Collection

The PhantomBuster Instagram Multiple Hashtag Collector Phantom tool was used to collect publicly available Instagram posts containing both a BPD hashtag (#borderlinepersonalitydisorder or #BPD) and an FP hashtag (#favoriteperson or #fp). Six post extractions were conducted over a single day in December 2021 using unique input combinations of one BPD hashtag and one FP hashtag (i.e., #favorite person + #bpd, #favorite person + #borderlinepersonalitydisorder, #fp + #borderlinepersonalitydisorder, #fp + #bpd, #borderlinepersonalitydisorder + #fp, #borderlinepersonalitydisorder + #favorite person). The tool was programmed to collect the 7,500 most recent public posts containing the first hashtag in the input and identify those also containing the second hashtag in the input[1]. Web links to the identified posts were automatically compiled into a CSV file. The six extractions yielded a total of 261 posts. After eliminating duplicates, the first and second authors independently judged posts as meeting the inclusion criteria for the final sample if they contained the keyword "favorite person" or "FP" in the image/video or caption (not simply the hashtag), and/or had an obvious focus on an interpersonal relationship (92.3% agreement, disagreement resolved by consensus). The final sample consisted of 54 posts. All posts in the sample had been posted to public, personal Instagram accounts. No demographic information about the post creators was publicly available and therefore was not collected. Similarly, it was not possible to confirm whether the post creators had received a formal diagnosis of BPD.

Coding Protocol

We followed the coding procedure for quantitative content analysis of visual media outlined by Rose (2022). All 54 posts were coded independently by six trained raters, including the first and second author. Raters were master's-level research assistants (three), clinical psychology doctoral students (two), and an assistant professor of psychology (one). Raters used a coding protocol developed specifically for this project by the first author in consultation with the second author based on the relevant theory and literature. The coding protocol, which is available as Supplementary Material, included basic characteristic variables (e.g., affective tone, relationship type), interpersonal construct variables (e.g., attachment style, validation seeking; see Table 1), and *Diagnostic and*

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1) At the time of data collection, the Instagram Multiple Hashtag Collector Phantom was unable to extract posts with #bpd entered as the first hashtag in the input due to Instagram imposed restrictions around sensitive content.

Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM−5; APA 2022) BPD criteria variables. Raters were instructed to assign codes for all variables to each post based on the content of its image(s) or video(s) and caption. A pilot sample (i.e., the first five posts of the sample) was independently coded by each rater. Disagreements were discussed, and the coding protocol was refined before raters proceeded with coding the full sample. Each rater recorded their codes in separate spreadsheets that were inaccessible to the other raters. Final variable codes were assigned for each post based on the modal coding response across raters. As there was an even number of raters, the assistant professor's codes were used to break ties. The coding protocol and all study data are publicly available (see Stein & Johnson, 2025).

Table 1

Definitions of Interpersonal Construct and Basic Characteristic Variables

Variables	Definition
Interpersonal Constructs	
Idealization	Attributes overly positive qualities to another person and minimizes their imperfections or failings so that the person is viewed as perfect, or as having exaggerated positive qualities (i.e., categorizing another as "all good"; Kernberg, 1967).
Devaluation	Denies the importance of another, characterizing them as completely flawed, worthless, or as having exaggerated negative qualities (i.e., categorizing another as "all bad"; Kernberg, 1967).
Attachment Style	
Secure	Ability to form close relationships without difficulty. Comfortable relying on others and having others rely on them. Not preoccupied with solitude or rejection (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).
Fearful	Desires close relationships but uncomfortable with forming them. Difficulty trusting or relying on others and preoccupied with being hurt when becoming close to others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).
Anxious/Preoccupied	Desires emotional closeness and experiences discomfort when lacking close relationships; however, views others as unwilling to reciprocate their desired level of closeness and occasionally preoccupied with others not valuing them to the extent that they do others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991)
Avoidant/Dismissing	Comfortable without close relationships. Values independence and self-reliance, preferring not to rely on others or have others rely on them (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

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Variables	Definition
Mentalization	
Accurate	Understanding of other people's mental states is close to reality.
Hypermentalizing	Makes assumptions about other people's mental states that go so far beyond observable data that others may struggle to see how they are justified (Sharp et al., 2013).
Hypomentalizing	Fails to consider the mental states that might explain another's behavior, even when there is adequate data available to make some hypothesis as to the reasons for the behavior (Fonagy et al., 2016).
Obsessiveness	Thoughts are repeatedly or constantly consumed or dominated by another person.
Jealousy	Feels jealous of another's relationships with others.
Validation Seeking	Has a strong need to share emotional pain with and be heard by another (Hopwood et al., 2012), and attempts to get another to acknowledge and accept their internal experiences and behaviors as valid and understandable.
Emotional Contagion	Has their emotions influenced by or "catches" another's emotions/affective states (Pizarro-Campagna et al., 2020).
Interpersonal Emotion Regulation	Regulates emotions (altered in valence and intensity) by recruiting the help of another person to alleviate their distress (Gratz et al., 2016; Hofmann et al., 2016).
Mood Dependency	Mood depends on another's perceived or actual feelings toward them and/or the perceived or actual status of their relationship with another.
Worth Dependency	Sense of self-worth depends on another's perceived or actual feelings toward them and/or the perceived or actual status of their relationship with another.
Identity Dependency	Bases their identity or sense of self on a relationship and/or someone with whom they have a relationship.
Functional Dependency	Depends on another's support and/or guidance in making decisions (e.g., what to wear, what occupation to have, who to be friends with) and/or carrying out tasks or activities of daily living (e.g., maintaining personal hygiene, cooking for oneself, making appointments) because they believe they are not competent enough to care for themself in a practical sense (APA, 2022; Arntz, 2005).

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Variables	Definition
Basic Characteristics	
Positive Affective Tone	Emotion conveyed is positively valenced.
Negative Affective Tone	Emotion conveyed is negatively valenced.
Number of Relationships	Scope of relationships being referred to (i.e., one, multiple, all).
Post Creator Attitude Toward FP	Emotional tone or sentiment expressed regarding the FP (i.e., positive, negative, ambivalent, neutral, unspecified/unclear).
FP Attitude Toward Post Creator	Emotional tone or sentiment they perceive the FP to have toward them (i.e., positive, negative, ambivalent, neutral, unspecified/unclear).

Reliability

A variable was considered reliable and included in the analysis if ≥ 70% of posts coded on that variable were coded in agreement by the majority of raters (i.e., ≥ 4). Two variables (i.e., attachment style, post creator attitude toward FP) were excluded from the final dataset due to low reliability. However, dichotomizing the attachment style variable into secure vs. insecure (including fearful, anxious/preoccupied, or avoidant/dismissing) produced improved agreement (74.1%) and was included in the final dataset. Of the 26 variables included, the average agreement was 90.0%.

Data Analysis

We calculated the frequency of each coded variable across the sample. We also conducted an exploratory factor analysis using tetrachoric correlation matrix (for binary variables) as input, and Geomin (oblique) rotation solutions. Factor analysis was conducted in R, Version 4.3.0 (R Core Team, 2023), using the *psych* package, Version 2.3.3 (Revelle, 2023). Variables that had more than two coding response options were condensed into a binary scale: mentalizing (hypermentalizing = 1, accurate mentalizing = 0), attachment style (insecure = 1, secure = 0), paranoia/dissociation (paranoia and/or dissociation = 1, absent = 0) and idealization/devaluation (idealization and/or devaluation = 1, absent = 0)[2].

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2) Given that there were no posts coded as "hypomentalizing", only "hypermentalizing" (= 1) was used in the binary mentalization variable. Although idealization and devaluation were coded separately by coders and the coding was reliable, only one instance of devaluation was noted; hence idealization and devaluation were combined as indicated.

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Results

Content Analysis

Basic Characteristics

Nearly every post referred to a single relationship (98.1%, n = 53). While the type of relationship was most often unspecified/unclear (70.4%, n = 38), some posts referred to a romantic partner (25.9%, n = 14), friend (1.9%, n = 1), or therapist (1.9%, n = 1). A negative affective tenor was apparent in 68.5% (n = 37) and a positive affective tenor in 38.9% (n = 21) of the posts. The attitude of the FP toward the post creator was largely unspecified/unclear (87.0%, n = 47); however, a positive (e.g., loving, admiring, trusting, appreciative) attitude was apparent in 9.3% (n = 5) of posts.

Interpersonal Constructs

Across posts, the most prevalent interpersonal construct was insecure attachment style (75.9%, n = 41), followed by obsessiveness (37.0%, n = 20), and mood dependency (35.2%, n = 19). Hypermentalizing was identified in 16.7% (n = 9) of all posts (though 9 out of the 10 posts in which the quality of mentalizing was evident were coded as hypermentalizing) and interpersonal emotion regulation was identified in 14.8% (n = 8) of all posts. Validation seeking and idealization were each present in 13.0% (n = 7) of posts and worth dependency was apparent in 9.3% (n = 5) of posts. Both identity dependency and functional dependency were apparent in 3.7% (n = 2) of posts, and jealousy, devaluation, and accurate mentalizing in 1.9% (n = 1) of posts. Emotional contagion was not identified in any posts.
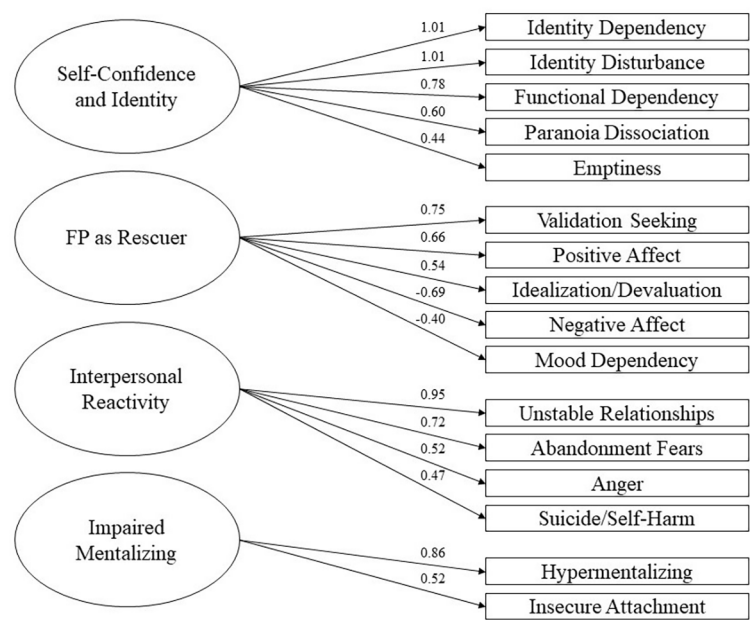
DSM–5 BPD Criteria

Frantic efforts to avoid abandonment was the most prevalent DSM-5 BPD symptom coded among the posts (35.2%, n = 19), followed by unstable relationships (31.5%, n = 17) and affective instability (25.9%, n = 14). Suicidal/self-injurious behavior was depicted or mentioned in 13.0% (n = 7) of posts, intense anger in 11.1% (n = 6) of posts, and chronic emptiness in 7.4% (n = 4) of posts. Impulsivity, identity disturbance, and dissociation were each apparent in 3.7% (n = 2) of posts and paranoia was apparent in 1.9% (n = 1) of posts.

Factor Analysis

The exploratory factor analysis suggested a four-factor solution, explaining 54.0% total variance (Figure 1). Variables were retained if they had a factor loading of at least 0.4 and did not cross load meaningfully with another factor (i.e., loadings < 0.20 absolute value difference in magnitude between the primary factor and any secondary factor[s]). Factor 1 was labeled "Self-Confidence and Identity", due to high loadings of identity dependen-

cy, identity disturbance, functional dependency, paranoia/dissociation, and chronic emptiness. Factor 2 was labeled "Interpersonal Reactivity" including unstable relationships, abandonment fears, intense anger, and suicidal/self-injurious behavior. Factor 3 was labeled "FP as Rescuer" due to high loadings of validation seeking, positive affect, idealization/devaluation, negative affect and mood dependency. Factor 4 was labeled "Impaired Mentalizing" because it included hypermentalizing and fearful or anxious/preoccupied (i.e., insecure) attachment style.

Figure 1

Central Themes of the Favorite Person

Note. Exploratory factor analysis results using the tetrachoric correlation matrix and Geomin (oblique) rotation for multi-factor solutions. Latent variables are represented by ellipses while manifest variables are represented by rectangles. Factor loadings are represented by single-headed arrows connecting latent variables to manifest variables. FP = favorite person.

Discussion

The present study used a quantitative content analysis of social media posts to investigate the "favorite person" of individuals with BPD. By identifying the basic characteristics, interpersonal constructs, and BPD symptoms present in these posts, we were able to gain insight into the experience of individuals who describe having an FP and the themes that characterize the FP relationship, allowing us to construct and introduce the

first working definition of the FP to the scholarly literature. As we discuss below, our findings suggest that the FP is someone to whom an individual with BPD is insecurely attached, who consumes the thoughts and evokes abandonment fears of the individual with BPD and is often viewed as a rescuer and depended on for a sense of identity and emotional validation. Further, the FP may represent an unstable relational context associated with a tendency to hypermentalize, mood reactivity, and the exacerbation of one's BPD symptoms.

Basic Characteristics of the FP

Our findings suggest that individuals with BPD who have an FP typically have only one at a given time, and who may often be a romantic partner. This is consistent with prior research suggesting that BPD is specifically associated with dysfunction in romantic relationships (Hill et al., 2008).

The majority of posts evidenced a negative affective tenor, suggesting that an FP relationship may often be distressing. Indeed, those with BPD experience more negative emotions during social interactions than those with other psychiatric diagnoses (Stepp et al., 2009), particularly with close others (Hepp et al., 2016). However, as some had a positive tone, the FP may elicit positive, or mixed, emotions as well.

Findings that attitudes of FPs toward post creators were largely unidentifiable may indicate that individuals with BPD are unsure how their FPs feel about them. This may also reflect a greater focus of posts on the creators' feelings toward the FP. However, as coding post creators attitudes toward their FPs proved unreliable in our dataset, we cannot conclude whether individuals with BPD tend to feel positively or negatively about their FPs.

Interpersonal Patterns in FP Relationships

Results suggested insecure attachment in the context of the FP relationship. Reflecting an anxious/preoccupied style, one post caption stated, "please love me, i love you so much." Perhaps more reflective of a fearful attachment style, another post caption stated, "Does anyone else just slowly cut themselves off when they feel like the other person just isn't interested?" These findings are consistent with elevated rates of insecure attachment in BPD (Agrawal et al., 2004) and corroborate Jeong et al. (2022)'s conjecture that the FP relationship reinforces insecure attachment behaviors (e.g., reassurance seeking), by providing short-term emotional solace, but deterioration in the relationship quality over time due to strain on both parties.

In line with the mentalization literature (e.g., Fonagy & Bateman, 2007), the frequency of hypermentalizing suggests that individuals with BPD often make personal and emotional interpretations of their FP's actions, words, and body language, and therefore may inaccurately assume their thoughts, feelings, and motives. One post described this

phenomenon: "If there is silence and there has been some form of altercation, and I can't think of a reason why they aren't angry with me, so I'll assume they hate me." These disruptions in social cognition may be particularly present in the close (e.g., FP) attachment relationships of those with BPD, and may lead to relational challenges and chronic relational anxiety and stress.

Obsessiveness was highly prevalent, suggesting that individuals who have an FP experience preoccupation with them. For example, one post stated, "you're all i think about you're all i want all i want is for us to talk every second of the day." Another post caption stated, "So let me explain what a FP is…you are obsessed with them, you think about them all the time, you just want to be by them!" Obsessiveness may result from insecure (particularly anxious/preoccupied) attachment, given evidence linking attachment insecurity to addiction (Burkett & Young, 2012) and patterns of beliefs typical in obsessive compulsive disorder, such as beliefs about the likelihood of threat/harm (Doron et al., 2009). The obsessive quality of the posts was primarily focused on the FP relationship and/or FP themselves, suggesting that the feared negative outcomes may have to do with the loss of the FP relationship or the FP's support and care.

Mood dependency was also prevalent, indicating that moods of individuals with BPD are affected by the perceived or actual status of their FP relationship or their FP's feelings about them. One post stated: "My problem is, once I get attached to someone, my mood starts to depend on how that person treats me." These individuals may feel great when they think their relationship with the FP is going well but become devastated or highly anxious if they perceive a threat to the relationship. They also seem to rely on the FP to regulate their emotions and validate their inner experience. One post stated, "Over time, the person with BPD will come to rely on the FP as an external regulator – meaning they need the FP to validate or create positive feelings and rely on the FP to sooth them when they are upset." Interestingly, research suggests that individuals with BPD both tend to select individuals with whom they have less close or lower quality relationships and find less benefit from interpersonal emotion regulation (Howard & Cheavens, 2023). Considering the emotional tone of posts was predominantly negative, this suggests that the relationship between someone and their FP may not satisfy interpersonal emotion regulation needs.

It appears that individuals may also base their self-worth on their FP's feelings toward them and the perceived quality of their relationship; therefore, difficulties in the FP relationship may leave the individual with BPD feeling worthless, while positive interactions may contribute to fleeting moments of high self-worth (Zeigler–Hill & Abraham, 2006). This idea was clearly expressed in one post: "When relationships are going smoothly, they feel good about themselves and hopeful for the future. When relationships are strained, they feel intense shame or self-loathing, and assume they are unlovable or unwanted." Similarly, some seem to base their identity on their FP relationship or change their personal characteristics, preferences, values, or goals to

match that of their FP. As a result, they may believe that their FP "completes them", or that they are "nobody" without their FP. The caption of one post stated, "Not me trying not to have an FP but feeling lost because I haven't talked to them in three days. But honestly, do I even exist anymore?" Disruptions in one's FP relationship may result in identity destabilization or confusion about who one really is (Jørgensen & Bøye, 2022).

Individuals seem to experience "splitting" (Kernberg, 2004) in their FP relationship, evidencing the vacillations between idealizing and devaluing relationship partners that commonly occur in BPD (APA, 2022). They may idealize, or view their FP as perfect, infallible, and/or as the center of their world, which can lead them to overlook maltreatment and remain in damaging relationships. As one post caption states, "I'd let him insult and belittle me all day telling me how disgusting I am and as long as he'd be speaking to me and showing me attention I'd be happy". Less frequently, these individuals may devalue, or view their FP as flawed, not meeting their expectations, and/or a source of frustration. These findings may evidence the vacillations between idealizing and devaluing relationship partners that commonly occur among individuals with BPD (APA, 2022).

BPD Symptoms in Relation to the FP

All nine DSM-5 BPD symptoms (APA, 2022) were identified among the posts, though to varying degrees. Unsurprisingly, the most explicitly interpersonal symptoms, frantic efforts to avoid abandonment and unstable relationships, were the most prevalent. This implies that individuals with BPD fear their FP's abandonment and make desperate attempts (e.g., pleading, clinging, suicide/self-harm threats) to prevent imminent separation or rejection from them. This was evident in one post caption which stated, "Please don't go…I love you please just love me I want to talk to you I want you to tell me what I'm doing wrong please please please." The considerable evidence of unstable relationships in the sample suggests that individuals' relationships with their FPs are often passionate or intense, stormy, and characterized by frequent arguments and ruptures.

The frequent characterization of affective instability supports findings that individuals with BPD demonstrate higher emotional reactivity to interpersonal stimuli than individuals without BPD (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021). Considering our mood dependency findings, individuals' emotions may be particularly reactive to the FP relationship status and the FP's presumed feelings toward them. The depiction of suicidal, self-injurious, and other self-damaging impulsive behaviors or thoughts may reflect the strong negative emotions experienced after rejection, conflict, or ruptures in the FP relationship (Brodsky et al., 2006; Wedig et al., 2012). One post contained a drawing of self-harm lacerations and razorblade alongside text stating, "i mean this in the most non manipulative way possible but i'm gonna kill myself if you don't love me." Similarly, the presence of anger may indicate a tendency for individuals to lash out at their FP when they believe they've been rejected or abandoned by them.

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Conversely, the DSM-based dissociative symptoms evident in a few posts may reflect an automatic response to block out painful feelings related to perceptions of abandonment (Lazarus et al., 2018). As the definition for the dissociation variable followed that of the DSM-5-TR (APA, 2022) BPD dissociation criterion (i.e., "transient, stress-related… severe dissociative symptoms"), it is unclear which components of pathological dissociation, such as detachment/depersonalization and compartmentalization (Mazzotti et al., 2016), were present. As individuals with BPD hypermentalize during instances of high emotional arousal (Fonagy & Bateman, 2007), the presence of paranoia suggests that these individuals may sometimes believe, for example, that their FP hates them or is going to abandon them. However, dissociation and paranoia were relatively rare among the posts compared to other BPD symptoms.

The chronic emptiness apparent in several posts may suggest that individuals feel empty when they are not around or communicating with their FP. Interestingly, the low identification of the identity disturbance criteron may be evidence of the FP's role in determining an individual's identity, such that when writing about the FP relationship the individual may present a relatively clear sense of self. Thus, ruptures in FP relationships may leave individuals with BPD feeling destabilized or that life is without meaning (Jørgensen & Bøye, 2022). This may also reflect the challenge in detecting and coding identity disturbance from brief social media posts.

Central Themes of the FP

Factor analysis findings suggest four fundamental themes of the FP in BPD. The theme of *self-confidence and identity* implies that the FP is someone on whom an individual with BPD bases their sense of identity, competence, and wholeness as a human. *Interpersonal reactivity* suggests that the FP evokes abandonment fears and is a source of vulnerability for intense emotions and self-damaging acts of desperation, which contribute to instability within the FP relationship. *FP as rescuer* reflects the FP as an idealized individual who elicits pleasant emotions and relieves intrapsychic pain. Consistent with research linking insecure attachment to disruptions in mentalization (Fonagy & Luyten, 2009), the final theme of *impaired mentalizing* suggests that the FP is someone whom an individual with BPD is insecurely attached to and tends to hypermentalize the mental states of.

Implications

Our findings have implications for the treatment and understanding of BPD. First, having knowledge of and terminology for this aspect of the lived experience of BPD may afford mental health clinicians a deeper understanding of and empathy toward their BPD patients and facilitate communication and trust between clinician and patient. Clinicians should carefully assess the nature and quality of their patients' close relationships and determine the impact of these relationships on their symptoms, rather than relying on

global evaluations of relational functioning. Knowledge of the FP may also inform treatment plans. For example, when BPD patients disclose that they have an FP, clinicians can specifically target the interpersonal processes and behaviors which may manifest uniquely or more strongly in this relationship. Clinicians may also work with patients with BPD who are not familiar with or do not use the "favorite person" language, yet still experience heightened acuity of symptoms in the context of a single close relationship; clinicians may benefit by both paying particular attention to the unique ways in which core BPD symptoms and other interpersonal challenges may emerge in this relationship, but also helping to increase their patients' awareness of the precipitating factors of this, versus other, relationships.

An understanding of the uniqueness of the FP relationship may also help therapists improve the effectiveness of existing evidence-based interventions. For instance, therapists employing dialectical behavior therapy (Linehan, 1993) skills may use examples or roleplays specific to the patient's FP relationship, rather than other relationships, to increase generalizability of skills outside of sessions to a particularly challenging relationship. Psychodynamic therapists may attune to the ways a patient's transference may not only reflect a general "template" about relationships (e.g., anxious attachment) but also *specific aspects* of the patient's FP relationship that are echoed in the context of the therapy relationship (e.g., if certain demographic features of the therapist match those of the patient's FP). Therapists who are themselves the patient's actual FP, may also benefit from helping the patient discuss the perceived role of the therapist in the patient's life, including ways in which the patient may expect more of the therapist than can be reasonably or ethically offered (e.g., patients whose mood is dependent on perceptions of the therapist's), such that the real relationship between therapist and patient may become itself a vehicle for change and promoting autonomy (e.g., Muran et al., 2010).

Our findings also have important implications for reducing the stigmatization of BPD. Historically, individuals with BPD have commonly been believed to be "difficult", "dangerous", "manipulative" and "attention-seeking" (Aviram et al., 2006; Day et al., 2018; Servais & Saunders, 2007; Sulzer, 2015), a view that harms individuals with BPD in social interactions and may interfere with access to mental health services. Knowledge of the potential uniqueness of the FP relationship may decrease misunderstanding about the intent of individuals with BPD in their interpersonal behavior as well as assumptions about the pervasiveness of their interpersonal dysfunction, lending a more accurate and compassionate view of these individuals. Additional work is needed to disentangle the differential manifestation of symptoms within the FP relationship versus other relationships.

Limitations

We recognize several limitations of this study. First, the small sample size of posts limits the generalizability of our findings, as the sample may not have been representative of all relevant posts on Instagram. It also may have increased sampling bias, as posts that did not contain the specified hashtags were not included in the sample. Furthermore, although we followed instructions outlined by Rose (2022), the coding of images and text-based data inevitably involves a degree of subjectivity, and thus may have affected the reliability of coding across raters.

Additionally, as we used Instagram as our data source, we were unable to collect demographic information about the post creators or certify that the post creators meet criteria for BPD. Similarly, we were unable to consider the potential impact that any possible co-occurring psychological disorders may have on a post creator's experience of the FP. Further, Instagram users who choose to post about the FP concept may not be representative of the larger population of individuals with BPD.

Lastly, as our study was exploratory in nature and lacked a comparison group, we cannot draw conclusions about the uniqueness of the patterns defining the FP relationship. Nevertheless, the goal of the current research was to characterize and define the FP, which we believe is an important first step toward the face, convergent, and divergent validity of the FP construct.

Conclusion

Taken together, the findings of this exploratory study suggest that the FP can be defined as someone to whom an individual with BPD is insecurely attached. The FP is often viewed as a rescuer and depended on for a sense of identity and emotional validation, consuming the thoughts and evoking the abandonment fears of individuals with BPD. The FP relationship may also be viewed as an unstable interpersonal context associated with a tendency to hypermentalize, and in which the moods of individuals with BPD are particularly reactive and symptoms of BPD are exacerbated. To provide a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the FP in individuals with BPD, future research on the FP should be conducted using samples of individuals with confirmed diagnoses of BPD, utilize interviews and/or surveys, and determine if and how the FP relationship significantly differs from other relationships.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contributions: Alexandra G. Stein: conceptualization, methodology, project administration, investigation, data curation, writing-original draft; Benjamin N. Johnson: conceptualization, methodology, supervision, formal analysis, writing-review and editing.

Data Availability: This study was not preregistered as there were no explicit hypotheses given its exploratory and descriptive nature. The information needed to reproduce all of the reported results is available (see Stein & Johnson, 2025).

Supplementary Materials

Supplementary Materials include the coding protocol and dataset (see Stein & Johnson, 2025).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Stein, A. G., & Johnson, B. N. (2025). *The "favorite person" in Borderline Personality Disorder: A content analysis of social media posts* [Dataset, coding protocol]. OSF. https://osf.io/8ernm

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